



Community Conflict, Traditional Dispute Resolution and Trauma Politics in Timor-Leste

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Picture: Fundasaun Mahein: A man prepares the soil in the fields, ready to plant crops that will sustain his family, in Leodudu-Poetete Village, Ermera (28 Oct 2025).

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Acronyms

AI	Artificial intelligence
AJAR	Asia Justice and Rights
CNRT	National Congress for Timorese Resistance
EUTL	University Students of Timor-Leste
FM	Fundasaun Mahein
MAG/MAGs	Martial and ritual arts groups
OPS	<i>Suku</i> Police Official
PNTL	National Police of Timor-Leste

Executive Summary

Timor-Leste has experienced significant progress in stability and institution-building since independence; however, Fundasaun Mahein's (FM) research and monitoring demonstrate that many communities continue to face persistent local tensions that affect social cohesion and everyday security and wellbeing. While these conflicts rarely escalate to serious violence, they undermine trust between families and groups, affect people's sense of security and complicate cooperation with state institutions. At the same time, communities continue to rely on traditional dispute resolution as the most legitimate and accessible means of preventing and managing conflict, even as they confront new challenges shaped by economic pressures, changing social norms and the rapid spread of digital information.

This report presents the findings of qualitative field research conducted by Fundasaun Mahein between June and October 2025. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, group discussions and key informant interviews with community members, youth, lia-na'in, women leaders, civil society, local authorities and police, the research examines the drivers of community conflict in Timor-Leste and explores the role of traditional mechanisms in resolving them.

Research Purpose and Approach

The research aimed to answer four key questions:

- What are the primary drivers of conflict within and between communities today?
- How do traditional mechanisms contribute to resolving or containing these conflicts?
- How do communities interpret the influence of political actors, youth groups and digital communication technologies on community cohesion and wellbeing?
- What are the implications of the field research findings for policy and community-based peacebuilding?

FM employed a qualitative community-centred approach to conduct the research. Interviews were done in several rural and peri-urban locations, and explored participants' perspectives on recent conflicts, long-standing tensions and patterns of social behaviour that contribute to local disputes. The research also drew on FM's extensive experience monitoring and analysing national political developments, security governance and conflict dynamics.

Key Findings

Structural socio-economic factors remain the primary drivers of local conflict

Across all research sites, structural socio-economic challenges were identified as the most consistent and fundamental sources of community conflict and tensions. Respondents consistently highlighted low education levels, limited job opportunities, economic dependence on land and persistent interpersonal and domestic violence as major contributors to community conflict. These pressures shape how people respond to disputes, influence the credibility of rumours and heighten the intensity of conflicts.

Several respondents also emphasised the ongoing impact of historical displacement and informal land occupation during the Indonesian era and post-independence. When combined with the absence of a comprehensive land adjudication system, these conditions create enduring land disputes that repeatedly contribute to conflict and tension.

Poor digital literacy and vulnerability to misinformation

While social media has become a primary tool for personal communication and accessing information, digital literacy remains extremely limited. This makes communities highly susceptible to manipulated videos, edited speeches and misleading information. Respondents described frequent incidents where false or manipulated content created fear, anger or distrust.

Examples include:

- Claims that a traffic accident victim was killed by police during recent demonstrations, which led to the burning of a PNTL vehicle
- Circulation of old photographs presented as recent evidence of failures in the health system
- Edited or AI-generated videos of political leaders used to imply secret instructions or conspiracies

These cases highlight how misinformation can rapidly escalate into real-world conflict, fear or distrust in communities where digital literacy is weak and structural vulnerabilities are already present.

Youth exclusion shapes conflict dynamics but youth also provide critical insight

Young people described consistent feelings of exclusion from economic and political opportunities. At the same time, many youth respondents offered sophisticated analyses of systemic drivers of conflict, directly linking unemployment and political exclusion to rising instability, crime and interpersonal conflict. The research findings suggest that while urgent investments and policy changes are needed to ensure youth inclusion and tackle

youth-related challenges, youth themselves can play a key role in developing and implementing future digital literacy programs and community awareness initiatives.

Local conflict is shaped by political identity and politicization within communities

Timor-Leste's history of resistance and political struggle means that political engagement and affiliation remain relatively strong within communities. Many people maintain long-standing loyalties to political leaders or parties, often shaped by family history or involvement in the resistance struggle. These identities often shape how disputes are interpreted, how rumours spread and how groups align during periods of tension.

Although FM finds that everyday community disputes are primarily driven by structural pressures, we also find that political affiliations can trigger or intensify local tensions in specific contexts. Respondents in some areas described friction between supporters of Fretilin and CNRT, while others noted that the mobilisation of MAGs by political parties during campaign periods sometimes contributed to tensions.

Elite rivalry is still widely perceived as linked to community conflict

Across research sites, many community members expressed the view that national-level rivalries can filter down to influence conflict at the local level. This perception is shaped in part by historical experience. For example, the 2006 politico-military crisis is widely seen as having been influenced by elite competition, with communities mobilised or manipulated by elites in order to provoke instability and chaos.¹ As a result, many citizens see a connection between elite behaviour and community-level tensions.

However, FM observes that elite rivalry functions less as a primary driver of community conflict and more as a trigger that can activate underlying structural tensions. Political statements, high-profile disagreements or provocative messaging on social media can aggravate local disputes, particularly in communities with strong political identities or unresolved rivalries dating back to earlier periods of conflict. The long-running power struggle between Marí Alkatiri and Xanana Gusmão remains a reference point in community narratives, reinforcing the belief that elite divisions directly shape local conflict, even when structural factors are the deeper cause.

Traditional mechanisms remain central but face new challenges

Traditional dispute resolution mechanisms continue to command the highest legitimacy and are widely seen as essential for restoring harmony. Lia-na'in and elders are valued

¹ In Tetun, such destabilisation tactics are often described as *hamanas situasaun* – lit. “make the situation hot.”

for their cultural authority, knowledge of local history and capacity to mediate conflicts in a holistic manner. Their collaboration with PNTL in resolving land disputes and family conflicts is generally respected and often effective.

However, these mechanisms face increasing pressure. Many disputes today involve digital mis- or dis-information, politically charged content or quasi-formal youth groups, which traditional systems were not designed to address. Traditional mechanisms also rely heavily on personal authority, and outcomes are uneven when leaders lack integrity or respect. Although women often contribute to mediation, their decisions are not always enforced without male endorsement, reflecting a persistent gap between formal gender equality and informal practice.

Intergenerational trauma shape conflict dynamics and political culture

The research further highlights that the long-term effects of conflict-related trauma remain an understudied but important factor influencing community conflict, youth behaviour and political culture. Experiences of violence and displacement have contributed to the normalisation of aggressive behaviour within households and communities, while emotional narratives of past suffering continue to shape political communication and leadership styles. Trauma may also reinforce reliance on informal, highly personalised modes of interaction, making it more difficult to consolidate formal, rule-based governance. These findings suggest that trauma-informed approaches will be increasingly important for understanding and preventing conflict in Timor-Leste, as well as for consolidating the rule of law and good governance.

Conclusions

Local conflict in Timor-Leste is shaped far more by structural pressures, social vulnerabilities and uneven access to information than by elite rivalry or political affiliation. Land insecurity, youth exclusion, low education levels, domestic and interpersonal violence and poor digital literacy remain the core drivers. Political affiliations influence how these tensions unfold, and elite behaviour can trigger or amplify local conflict, but it rarely generates conflict in the absence of pre-existing structural stress.

However, in the absence of a comprehensive state response to the deep socio-economic problems facing the country, including both those listed above and the national-level challenges of economic diversification, fiscal sustainability and youth unemployment, political tensions may eventually escalate into larger-scale conflict.

Meanwhile, traditional mechanisms remain indispensable for preventing and resolving community-level disputes, but they are increasingly challenged by new forms of disorder and conflict and the increased reliance on digital communication and information.

Communities show a continued commitment to local harmony and respect for traditional authority and wisdom; however, these require stronger support from state institutions, civil society and youth leaders to address the growing challenges posed by emerging technologies, changing social norms and economic challenges.

Introduction

Since the restoration of independence, Timor-Leste has achieved notable gains in socio-political stability and consolidation of state institutions. Despite these achievements, FM's long-term monitoring and field research show that many communities continue to experience recurring tensions and disputes that affect social cohesion and everyday wellbeing. These conflicts rarely escalate to severe violence, yet they undermine trust between families and groups, weaken cooperation with state institutions and contribute to broader anxieties about safety and stability.

At the same time, traditional dispute resolution continues to serve as the foundation of community-level governance. In line with previous research findings,² FM finds that *lia-na'in* and elders remain the most trusted authorities for resolving disputes and maintaining local harmony. Their role is central in Timor-Leste's context where formal mechanisms can be slow or inaccessible, and where community members often prefer locally and culturally grounded processes for addressing grievances. However, traditional systems now operate in an environment that is changing rapidly due to economic stress, shifting social norms and a fast-moving digital information landscape that can amplify and trigger conflict in new ways.

This report presents the results of qualitative field research conducted by FM between June and October 2025. The research builds on FM's longstanding engagement with communities and experience analysing security sector governance, political developments and conflict dynamics. The study sought to document community perspectives on the drivers of contemporary conflict and to analyse the role of traditional mechanisms in responding to tensions. It also explored how political identities, digital communication technologies and the behaviour of youth and quasi-formal groups shape conflict at the local level.

Purpose of the Study

The research aimed to answer four key questions:

- What are the primary drivers of conflict within and between communities today?

² See, for example, The Asia Foundation's *Timor-Leste Safety, Security and Justice Perceptions Survey* (2022), which found that community leaders and traditional mechanisms continue to play a central role in dispute resolution. Report available at: <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Timor-Leste-Safety-Security-and-Justice-Perceptions-Survey-2022.pdf>

- How do traditional mechanisms contribute to resolving or containing these conflicts?
- How do communities interpret the influence of political actors, youth groups and digital communication technologies on community cohesion and wellbeing?
- What are the implications of these findings for public policy, peacebuilding and community-level conflict prevention?

The study fills an important gap in understanding how ordinary citizens experience conflict in their daily lives. While significant attention has been given to national-level political developments and the functioning of state security institutions, less is understood about how structural socio-economic pressures, digital misinformation and changing social behaviour shape conflict within villages, neighbourhoods and families. This research seeks to strengthen that understanding and provide evidence to support more responsive and contextually grounded policies and interventions.

Analytical Approach

For this research, FM employed a qualitative community-centred methodology. Semi-structured interviews and group discussions were conducted with a diverse range of participants, including elders, *lia-na'in*, youth, women leaders, local authorities, police and civil society representatives. Discussions focused on recent conflicts, long-standing disputes, the perceived causes of tension and the effectiveness of traditional and formal mechanisms. Participants were also asked about experiences with misinformation, digital technology, the influence of political events and the role of youth and MAGs in community dynamics.

The analysis draws on FM's extensive knowledge of security and governance issues and its long-term engagement with decision makers and conflict-affected communities. This contextual grounding allows the report to distinguish between long-term structural drivers of conflict and short-term, episodic triggers, such as political rivalries and provocative public messaging.

Context and Rationale

Timor-Leste continues to face significant socio-economic challenges, including low education levels, limited job opportunities, slow economic diversification and widespread economic dependence on land for agriculture and wealth storage. Many respondents described persistent interpersonal and domestic violence, ongoing disputes linked to displacement and informal land occupation, and rising socio-economic pressures related to economic hardship, changing norms and patterns of behaviour among youth. These structural factors form the backdrop against which most community conflicts unfold.

The rapid expansion of mobile internet access has created both opportunities and risks. For many citizens, social media is now the primary source of information, but digital literacy remains limited.³ As a result, communities are highly vulnerable to manipulated videos, edited political speeches and misleading or deliberately inflammatory content. Several recent incidents – including some documented in this report – show that digital misinformation can provoke fear, anger or even violence, especially when tensions are already present.

Political identities and affiliations are also significant factors shaping local conflict dynamics. Many Timorese people maintain long-standing loyalties to political leaders and parties due to family history, resistance-era affiliations and the relatively high level of politicization that characterises Timorese society. Although structural socio-economic pressures remain the primary drivers of local conflict, political affiliations can intensify tensions under certain conditions. Respondents described tensions between supporters of Fretilin and CNRT, occasionally escalating to violence in some areas. Others voiced concerns about the mobilisation of MAGs by political actors during election periods, although the links between conflict and MAG involvement in political mobilisation are less clear.⁴

The belief that national-level rivalries – particularly personal rivalries between elite politicians – influence local conflict is widespread. In FM's view, this perception is shaped by the legacy of the 2006 politico-military crisis, which is commonly understood as having been exacerbated by competing elite interests. Consequently, many citizens still view elite behaviour as a potential source of instability at the community level. FM's findings suggest that while elite rivalry is not a primary cause of community conflict today, it can act as a trigger that activates or exacerbates deeper structural tensions, especially in highly politicised or emotionally charged situations.

In addition, this research highlights that the long-term effects of conflict-related trauma play an important and often overlooked role in shaping community conflict, youth behaviour and political culture. Experiences of violence and displacement have contributed to the normalisation of aggressive behaviour within households and

³ FM understands digital literacy as the “[a]bility to use information and communication technologies to find, critically assess, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills” (Cedefop). Available here: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-glossary/glossary/digitale-alphabetisierung>

⁴ For in-depth analysis of the role of MAGs in Timor-Leste's political culture, see FM's previous research report *Politicisation of Martial and Ritual Arts Groups: Implications for National Security, Peacebuilding & Development* (2023). Report available here: <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/MNH20PoliticisationMAGs-FINAL.pdf>

communities, while emotionally charged narratives of past suffering continue to influence political communication and leadership styles. Trauma may reinforce reliance on informal and highly personalised modes of interaction, which can complicate attempts to strengthen rule-of-law based governance and build modern institutions.

Structure of the Report

The remainder of the report is organised as follows:

- The Methodology section outlines the research design and analytical approach.
- The Key Findings section presents the major themes that emerged from fieldwork, focusing on structural drivers of conflict, digital misinformation, youth behaviour, political identity and the role of traditional mechanisms.
- The Case Studies section provides three detailed examples of how conflicts arise and are resolved in practice.
- The analytical section on Intergenerational Trauma and Community Conflict examines how the long-term legacy of past violence shapes contemporary conflict dynamics, youth behaviour, political culture and institutional development.
- The Conclusions and Recommendations section summarises the main insights and offers policy and programmatic recommendations for government, security institutions, civil society and community leaders.

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative, community-centred methodology designed to capture the lived experiences, perceptions and insights of community members regarding the drivers of local conflict and the role of traditional mechanisms in resolving them. The approach reflects FM's longstanding commitment to grounded, participatory research in conflict-affected communities and draws on more than a decade of institutional experience analysing security sector governance, national politics and community-level conflict dynamics.

Research Design

The study used a combination of semi-structured individual interviews and small group discussions to gather data from a diverse cross-section of community actors. Field research was conducted between June and October 2025 in selected rural and peri-urban areas chosen for their relevance to FM's long-term monitoring and their varied experiences with land disputes, crime, youth-related conflict, political tensions and traditional dispute resolution.

The research aimed to document the full spectrum of community experiences, including both routine disputes and more serious tensions that have emerged in the post-independence era. Questions explored participants' perceptions of the causes of conflict, the processes used to address disputes and any recent incidents involving misinformation, political mobilisation or MAG activity. The semi-structured, qualitative design allowed researchers to probe sensitive issues in depth and to understand how broader structural challenges and socio-economic pressures shape behaviour and conflict at the local level.

Participant Selection

Participants were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to ensure representation across key community groups. The research team sought input from:

- Elders and *lia-na'in* involved in traditional dispute resolution
- Youth, including members and non-members of MAGs
- Women leaders and women with experience in community mediation
- Local authorities, including *suku* and *aldeia* representatives
- PNTL officers with experience responding to local disputes

- Civil society representatives active in community engagement or advocacy

This diversity provided a broad range of perspectives and helped identify common patterns in conflict dynamics and resolution practices.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews formed the core of data collection. These interviews allowed participants to describe recent disputes, long-standing tensions and everyday experiences that shape community cohesion. Interviewers used open-ended questions to explore:

- Perceived drivers of local conflict
- The role of land insecurity, economic stress and education levels
- The influence of digital technologies and misinformation
- Youth behaviour and the role of MAGs
- Political identities, affiliations and perceptions of political actors
- The functioning and legitimacy of traditional dispute resolution mechanisms

Group discussions were also conducted in some locations to explore shared community understandings and collective experiences. These discussions helped identify how rumours spread, how disputes mobilise groups and how community norms influence conflict sensitivity and decision making.

Where relevant, interviewers asked participants to describe or explain specific incidents involving social media, politically charged content or the spread of false information. These accounts provided valuable insight into how misinformation shapes perceptions and contributes to conflict escalation or mistrust.

Ethical Considerations

FM followed principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality and informed consent. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and that their identities would not be disclosed. Sensitive political topics and discussions about violence, MAG participation or criminal activity were handled with care to minimise risk to participants.

Data Analysis

The research team used thematic analysis and internal discussions to identify patterns across interviews and group discussions. Analysis drew on FM's extensive contextual knowledge to distinguish between:

- Long-term structural drivers of conflict, including socio-economic pressures, land insecurity, education and domestic or interpersonal violence
- Short-term triggers, including political statements, misinformation, rumours and provocative actions by youth or MAGs

Limitations

As with most qualitative research, findings are based on the perspectives of those interviewed and may not represent all communities across Timor-Leste. Digital misinformation is also difficult to verify independently, though the research ensured that specific examples provided were cross-checked to ensure accuracy.

Despite these limitations, FM believes the research provides a reliable and nuanced picture of community conflict dynamics in Timor-Leste's current context, grounded in extensive field engagement and reinforced by repeated insights across multiple locations and demographic groups.

Key Findings

The field research identified a range of conflict drivers that vary by location and circumstance but share common underlying patterns. Across all research sites, respondents emphasised that community-level conflict in Timor-Leste is shaped primarily by structural socio-economic pressures and long-standing vulnerabilities. Political affiliations, elite rivalries and external events – including information regarding events occurring in other countries – can intensify these tensions in specific contexts. However, they tend to function as triggers that activate or exacerbate deeper structural problems, rather than as the main causes of conflict. The sections below summarise the major themes that emerged from the fieldwork.

Low education levels and limited employment opportunities

Across all communities visited, respondents highlighted low education levels and limited employment as major contributors to community tensions and interpersonal conflict. Young people in particular described frustration at their lack of economic opportunities and the sense that advancement is based on personal connections rather than merit. These frustrations manifest in multiple ways, including:

- Participation in MAGs or peer groups that can escalate disputes
- Increased involvement in theft of livestock, crops or personal belongings
- Susceptibility to rumours, misinformation and provocative narratives
- Interpersonal disputes linked to financial stress or social media misuse
- Anti-social and criminal activity, including communal violence and quasi-organised theft by youth “gangs” (see below)

Community members frequently linked economic insecurity to declining social cohesion and rising conflict between families.

Economic dependence on land, displacement and insecure tenure

Land continues to be a central driver of conflict in communities in rural, urban and peri-urban areas. Many families still lack formal land titles, and disputes stemming from displacement during the Indonesian occupation or post-independence return movements remain unresolved. Because land holds both economic and socio-cultural value, conflicts over boundaries and usage rights are highly sensitive and can escalate quickly.

In the absence of a trusted and comprehensive state-led land adjudication system, communities often rely on traditional leaders to resolve disputes, yet the complexity of competing claims means that some cases remain unresolved for years. Some local

leaders expressed their inability to deal with more complex land issues due to their sensitivity, and preferred to pass such cases to national authorities. Respondents described repeated incidents where land disputes reignited tensions between or within families, sometimes involving violence or property damage.

Domestic and interpersonal violence contribute to instability

Domestic violence and interpersonal disputes were widely mentioned as routine features of community life that often escalate to broader tensions. Respondents cited contributing factors such as alcohol use, financial stress and gender inequities. Although these disputes originate in households, they frequently pull in extended families, neighbours or youth groups, thereby becoming community-level conflicts.

Poor Digital Literacy and Vulnerability to Misinformation

Although mobile internet access has expanded rapidly across Timor-Leste, digital literacy remains limited. Respondents across all age groups expressed difficulty distinguishing between reliable information and manipulated or deliberately provocative content. This vulnerability has created new pathways for conflict escalation.

Participants cited multiple examples of misinformation spreading through Facebook, TikTok and WhatsApp, including:

- A false rumour claiming a traffic accident victim was killed by police, which led to anger and the burning of a PNTL vehicle
- Circulation of old photographs portraying health system failures, shared during a period of tension and misinterpreted as recent events
- Edited or AI-generated videos of political leaders implying secret meetings, political deals or instructions

These incidents illustrate how misinformation exploits existing vulnerabilities, particularly in communities already experiencing economic stress or political division.

Respondents also described routine conflict linked to the misuse of social media, including cases involving jealousy, extramarital relationships, the spread of rumours or the exposure of private messages. These incidents frequently escalated into domestic or community-level disputes. Participants noted that young people often use social media as a platform for harassment, bullying or intimidation, with online behaviour often translating into offline abuse or violence.

Politically charged media content was identified as having a destabilising effect in communities. Respondents described how edited speeches or misleading headlines shaped perceptions of national events and often triggered emotionally charged reactions.

In communities with strong political identities, politically motivated content shared on social media frequently intensified existing tensions.

Youth exclusion and responses

Youth respondents consistently reported feelings of exclusion from economic, political and social opportunities. Many described a sense of frustration and hopelessness about their future prospects. This frustration sometimes manifests in harmful behaviours, including:

- Engaging in theft or property damage
- Participating in fights or confrontations
- Reacting impulsively to misinformation and rumours

Adults in several communities linked rising youth-related disturbances to a decline in discipline, strained household relationships and limited access to meaningful employment or training. In several communities, respondents reported a decline in mutual support and collective responsibility, particularly among younger generations.

Across multiple research locations, respondents described a noticeable increase in quasi-organised theft committed by groups of young people. In rural areas, these incidents typically involve the theft of animals, harvested crops or stored food, while in urban and peri-urban settings they involve motorbikes, mobile phones or other small valuables. Community members emphasised that these acts are often carried out by loosely connected groups of youth rather than established criminal networks. According to some respondents, these groups occasionally have family ties to local veterans or other influential individuals, and thus enjoy some degree of “protection” or impunity.

Respondents, both youth and older people, attributed this trend to a combination of economic hardship, lack of employment, boredom, peer pressure and the erosion of traditional social controls. In several cases, thefts triggered wider disputes when families confronted suspected perpetrators or retaliated based on rumours or assumptions. Elders and *lia-na'in* noted that such incidents increasingly pull traditional leaders into conflict mediation, yet the involvement of youth groups and the circulation of accusatory rumours on social media can complicate resolution efforts. These patterns reinforce broader findings that structural socio-economic stress, limited opportunities for youth and the weakening of community norms contribute to rising tensions and insecurity.

Despite these challenges, youth demonstrated notable insight into the underlying causes of conflict. Many linked unemployment, lack of meritocracy, political exclusion and structural inequality to rising crime and instability. These insights suggests that youth could play a central role in future peacebuilding and digital literacy initiatives. Evidence

suggests that young people are the most capable of understanding digital platforms and could be trained to support community awareness programs on misinformation and conflict prevention.

Political Identities and politicization

Political identity remains deeply embedded in Timorese society due to decades of resistance and political struggle. Many families maintain long-standing loyalties to political parties or leaders. These identities influence how people interpret disputes and how alliances form during periods of tension.

Respondents in some areas described ongoing friction between supporters of Fretilin and CNRT, or resentment based on perceived wrongs committed during the late Portuguese era or the Indonesian occupation. Although these tensions rarely escalate on their own, they can intensify when combined with misinformation, provocative political statements or youth mobilisation.

Some respondents noted that MAGs are occasionally mobilised during election periods, although the relationship between MAG mobilisation and community conflict is somewhat unclear. In areas where political loyalties are strong and structural vulnerabilities are acute, the involvement of MAGs in political activities can contribute to heightened tension or anxiety; however, direct, causal relationships between MAG political mobilisation and violence is difficult to demonstrate. FM interprets the conflation of MAG politicization with violence by some community members as being driven by, on one hand, anxieties about the lack of active inclusion of youth by mainstream political parties and successful “co-optation” of this frustration in some areas by new, MAG-affiliated parties; and, on the other, the view that youth participation in MAGs is associated with engagement in “problematic” behaviours, including violence.

Several respondents reported believing that national-level political rivalry, particularly the long-running tensions between prominent leaders, directly influences local conflict. FM believes that this perception is rooted in trauma from the 2006 crisis, which remains a powerful reference point in community narratives about conflict and political intrigue.

FM observes that elite rivalry does not typically generate community conflict on its own. Instead, it acts as a trigger that can aggravate deeper structural issues when mistrust, political identity and socio-economic stress are already present.

Traditional leaders command strong legitimacy

Across all research sites, *lia-na'in* and elders were described as the most trusted authorities for resolving disputes and restoring harmony. Their knowledge of local history,

social norms and relationships enables them to mediate conflicts in culturally appropriate ways.

Traditional mechanisms were seen as particularly effective for:

- Land disputes
- Family conflicts
- Inter-family arguments
- Social disputes involving youth

In many areas, PNTL officers work alongside traditional leaders to manage disputes, especially when tensions risk escalating to violence. Respondents generally described these collaborations as productive and respectful, although concerns were raised in locations where individual officers had perceived political or MAG affiliations.

Traditional systems were not designed to address the digital misinformation, political content and quasi-formal youth mobilisation that now shape many conflicts. Respondents described cases where local leaders struggled to intervene due to the speed and scale with which online rumours spread.

Gendered dynamics reveal a gap between formal equality and informal practice

FM's research has consistently found that women continue to play important roles in mediation and decision making within households and extended families. However, their contributions are often informal and not always enforced unless endorsed by male authorities. This highlights a persistent gap between legal gender equality and entrenched cultural norms. These issues will be discussed in greater detail in an upcoming report.

Case Studies

The following three case studies illustrate different pathways through which community conflict emerges, escalates and is responded to at the local level. Together they show how misinformation, historical grievances and youth-related criminal activity shape tensions and conflict, and how traditional and formal conflict resolution systems operate.

Case Study 1: Community Panic Linked to Youth Conflict and Digital Misinformation

Background and Timeline

Two major incidents in 2024 and 2025 created widespread confusion and fear in several communities. Both cases highlight the growing vulnerability of Timorese society to unverified information spread rapidly through social media, and demonstrate how online content can trigger real-world conflict, particularly among young people.

Incident A: Viral Misinformation on Alleged Youth Violence

In 2024, a video circulated rapidly on Facebook and WhatsApp alleging violent confrontations between MAG members and local youth in several neighbourhoods of Dili. The video was shared widely before any verification took place. As panic spread, rumours of imminent attacks proliferated, creating a sense of widespread insecurity.

In response, youth in several locations – including Manatuto, Vemase, Venilale and Bairo Pite – set up informal checkpoints and blocked roads. Older residents reacted emotionally, expressing fear of renewed youth clashes and urging the government to intervene. The situation demonstrated how misinformation can trigger spontaneous mobilisation and public panic when digital literacy is low and trust in formal communication channels is limited.

Incident B: False Reports of a Student Death during Student Protest

In September 2025, students held a major demonstration in Dili to protest several parliamentary decisions.⁵ Following clashes with PNTL officers, an old photograph resurfaced online showing a person lying dead in a hospital bed. It was falsely presented

⁵ For further information about the protest, see Fundasaun Mahein's article "Generational Transition, Political Frustration and Risks to Stability in Timor-Leste" (2025), available here: <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2025/09/18/generational-transition-political-frustration-and-risks-to-stability-in-timor-leste/>

as evidence that police had beaten a student to death during the protest, although in reality the person had died due to a traffic accident.

The misinformation spread rapidly, leading to a surge of anger among students and their supporters. In the hours that followed, a government vehicle near UNTL was set on fire, and the protests escalated in intensity. For two days after this, traffic in the capital mostly came to a standstill as residents attempted to avoid the violence. Some political actors and party supporters circulated or endorsed the misinformation, further undermining trust in official statements from police and state institutions.

Key Actors and Drivers

Actors involved included university students, police units, political party members, local residents and traditional leaders. Key drivers were low digital literacy, strong emotional reactions to rumours, existing political identities, political frustration (particularly in the case of the student demonstrations), high levels of community politicization and the absence of rapid formal misinformation response mechanisms.

Response and Resolution

In response to the first incident (youth conflict), traditional leaders attempted to restore calm using their community authority, but the speed of online misinformation limited their effectiveness. Formal institutions, including PNTL and government offices, lacked the tools or platforms to quickly verify and counter circulating hoaxes. In some cases, political figures contributed to confusion by amplifying misleading content.

After several tense days, the demonstration was resolved peacefully through dialogue between the protest leaders and parliament members. Parliament accepted several key demands of the protesters, leading to widespread jubilation in the streets. While some PNTL officers reportedly acted roughly towards some students, overall the police response was restrained and succeeded in preventing escalation.

Together, the two incidents show that traditional mechanisms are not well-equipped to address conflicts driven by digital misinformation, and that communities require improved digital literacy and more effective formal communication systems to prevent panic-driven escalation.

Case Study 2: Long-Running Land Dispute in Viqueque

Background and Timeline

This case concerns a protracted land dispute with roots in the Indonesian occupation. In 1980, the Indonesian military forcibly relocated the residents of *Suku* Uma Tolu from their original settlement in Lakluta, Viqueque Municipality, to an area called Sumako, which

lies within the boundaries of *Suku* Luka. A new administrative unit, also named *Suku* Uma Tolu, was established in this relocated area.

During 24 years of occupation, the relocated population developed strong physical and emotional ties to the land, creating a sense of belonging and economic dependency that persisted after independence.

Around 2000, after the restoration of independence, residents of *Suku* Luka demanded that the relocated *Suku* Uma Tolu community return to their original homeland. The *Suku* Uma Tolu community refused, arguing that they had been forcibly moved and that any decision to relocate them again would have to come from the Timorese state rather than from local actors.

The dispute has remained unresolved for more than four decades. Although tensions have not always escalated into violence, they persist and violence periodically resurfaces.

Key Actors and Drivers

Actors include residents of both *sukus*, *lia-na'in* and other traditional leaders facilitating informal dialogue, municipal land authorities and subdistrict administrators.

Key conflict drivers include:

- Historical injustice and grievance linked to forced displacement by the Indonesian military
- Lack of enforceable post-independence land adjudication system
- Competing land claims based on historical/cultural ties
- Distrust in government's capacity or willingness to resolve the issue

Response and Attempts at Resolution

Traditional leaders have attempted to mediate between the two communities on multiple occasions. These efforts have reduced tension at certain moments but have not produced agreement, largely because the dispute centres on deeply held historical memories and identity claims, as well as the fact that the land holds significant economic value.

Government institutions – particularly the Land and Property Directorate (*Direcção de Terras e Propriedades*) – have received formal complaints and facilitated discussions but lack the legal authority to issue a final decision. Subdistrict administrators have indicated that any durable resolution must come from the central government, which has not yet addressed the issue of sub-district boundaries created during the Indonesian occupation.

This case clearly demonstrates the limits of both traditional conflict resolution mechanisms *and* the current formal structure when confronted with historical disputes with highly complex legal and social dimensions.

Case Study 3: Youth-Related Crime and the Role of Traditional Leaders

Background and Timeline

From 2018 to 2024, communities in *Suku* Uma Tolu, *Suku* Luka and *Suku* Bikaren, all in Viqueque Municipality, experienced repeated incidents of organised theft allegedly carried out by groups of young people. These youth groups formed loosely organised networks across *suku* boundaries.

The alleged criminal activities included:

- Identifying potential targets such as animals, crops and stored agricultural goods
- Coordinating with youth from neighbouring villages to execute thefts
- Arranging transportation for stolen items
- Selling goods in local markets and dividing the proceeds

The stolen items ranged from cows and pigs to corn, bananas and other produce. The losses were significant for affected families and contributed to rising resentment between communities.

Community members reported that they captured some of those involved in both 2019 and 2023. These arrests revealed that local youth were often the organisers, while others from surrounding villages were recruited to steal the items identified.

Key Actors and Drivers

Actors included the youth perpetrators, families of victims, *lia-na'in*, *suku* and *aldeia* chiefs, community councils and OPS members. The principal drivers were:

- High youth unemployment
- Economic stress on households
- Weakening family discipline and reduced community social control
- Peer influence and youth group dynamics
- Limited police deterrence in rural areas
- Perceived injustice and anger among victims

Several respondents expressed fear that repeated thefts could provoke violent retaliation, property destruction or lead to long-term hostilities between families.

Response and Resolution

Because the perpetrators and victims often belonged to the same extended families or social networks, traditional leaders chose to use community-based dispute resolution mechanisms rather than relying primarily on formal legal processes.

Lia-na'in and elders organised discussions between the parties and implemented customary practices that included:

- Compensation for stolen goods, including replacing lost livestock
- Assistance with agricultural labour and fixing damaged animal enclosures
- Ceremonial reconciliation
- Forgiveness and reintegration for youth

These traditional mechanisms emphasised restoring social harmony and preventing long-term division within the community.

OPS supported the traditional process by explaining the legal implications of theft and urging youth to cease their involvement, but largely deferred to traditional structures for immediate resolution.

This case illustrates that traditional mechanisms remain effective for addressing youth-related crime when perpetrators and victims share close social ties. However, it also underlines the structural pressures – particularly lack of youth opportunity and perceived weakening of traditional community values and social control – that contribute to recurring cycles of such crime.

Intergenerational Trauma, Community Conflict and Political Culture: An Understudied Factor in Timor-Leste

Decades of colonial exploitation, military occupation, forced displacement, serious human rights violations and state-sanctioned terror has produced widespread trauma across Timor-Leste's population. Although this legacy is widely acknowledged, its long-term effects on contemporary conflict dynamics, youth behaviour and political culture remain under-studied. Most research on conflict-related trauma on Timor-Leste's context has focused on the psychological consequences of the Indonesian occupation and the 2006–07 crisis,⁶ but far less attention has been paid to how trauma continues to shape patterns of tension and instability today, particularly across generations. In addition, the ways in which past trauma has shaped Timor-Leste's political culture and identity has received little attention from researchers. This section links existing research with FM's observations about the long-term effects of trauma on conflict dynamics and Timorese political culture.

Research on the links between past trauma and patterns of contemporary violence in Timor-Leste has suggested that experiences of violence have contributed to the normalisation of aggressive behaviour within households and communities. For example, an analysis by the Equality Institute (2025) found that violence often “cycles through generations”, with adults who experienced violence as children more likely to reproduce those behaviours.⁷ Similarly, studies by The Asia Foundation (2017)⁸ and AJAR (2024)⁹ found that youth conflicts of today cannot be separated from past legacies of insecurity, displacement and fear.

⁶ See, for example, Brooks et al. (2011), who found that exposure to human rights abuses during the occupation, combined with current poverty, significantly increased the likelihood of explosive anger and aggressive behaviour in the post-independence period. Also see Silove et al. (2014), who showed that renewed unrest during the 2006–07 crisis led to a major spike in PTSD and distress, demonstrating how old trauma is reactivated when new crises emerge.

⁷ See the Equality Institute's 2025 study “Violence against children in Timor-Leste and consequences on adult health and exposure to adversity”, available here:

<https://www.equalityinstitute.org/app/uploads/2025/09/Violence-against-children-in-Timor-Leste-and-Consequences-on-Adult-Health-and-Exposure-to-Adversity-Full-Report.pdf>

⁸ See “The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia - Timor-Leste” (2017), available here:

https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Timor-Leste-StateofConflictandViolence_revised.pdf

⁹ See ““Our Young People Can Also Lead in Contributing to Peace”: Youth, Peace and Security in Timor Leste” (2024), available here: <https://asia-ajar.org/justiceforpeace/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/12.-Timor-Leste-PAR-Our-young-people-contribute-in-Peace-Amel.pdf>

FM's own research reinforces these findings. Interviews conducted during this and prior research have linked youth aggression, MAG involvement and criminality not only to socio-economic factors such as low education and unemployment, but also to legacies of violence within families and communities. Unresolved psychological distress often manifests as uncontrolled anger, depression, alcohol abuse or domestic violence, all of which directly influence community conflict. The absence of accessible psychosocial care means that trauma continues to circulate through families and communities.¹⁰

FM also observes that conflict-related trauma has shaped Timor-Leste's political culture, leadership style and governance. Many senior political figures lived through extreme violence and personal loss, and they frequently engage in highly emotional discussions about their wartime experiences with communities. While memorialising past sacrifices is understandable and even necessary, there is a risk that leaders may be re-traumatising themselves and their audiences through constant emotional engagement with painful memories. In this sense, excessive focus on traumatic narratives reinforces a political culture based on emotion, personal loyalty and historical grievance.

FM has long written about the tension between Timor-Leste's oral culture and tradition-based decision making – characterised by traditional hierarchies, personal loyalties and informality¹¹ – and the requirements of modern, “rational-legal” governance systems.¹² By keeping both leaders and communities anchored in highly emotional and personalised modes of interaction, the “politics of trauma” makes it more difficult to enforce and normalise formal procedures, impartial decisions and modern institutional norms.

This raises profound questions about Timor-Leste's political identity and state formation. If trauma narratives continue to be central in political rhetoric and governance decisions, does this hinder the emergence of transparent, efficient and accountable governance and robust rule of law? How can the country build a state that is both grounded in the people's shared historical experience and capable of delivering professional, predictable and rational administration?

¹⁰ FM has written previously about inadequate psychosocial support and trauma-healing services in Timor-Leste. See “Recovering from War Means Healing from Trauma” (2018), available here:

<https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2018/08/06/recovering-from-war-means-healing-from-trauma/>

¹¹ See “Empower the Youth for Democratic Renewal and National Salvation” (2025), available here:

<https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2025/04/02/empower-the-youth-for-democratic-renewal-and-national-salvation/>

¹² Max Weber's (1997) typology of authority distinguishes between, on one hand, rational-legal authority, grounded formal laws and rules and most associated with modern democratic states, and, on the other, traditional and charismatic authority, grounded in informal customary practice and the personal charisma of leaders, respectively.

FM believes that the answer lies in finding a balance between tradition and modernity: strengthening the best elements of indigenous Timorese culture – such as strong family ties, community solidarity and respect for elders – while also building the institutional foundations of modernity, such as impartial justice, transparent administration, effective policing, infrastructure, education and economic opportunity. This mirrors FM’s earlier argument for a model of “social democracy with Timorese characteristics”, in which Timor-Leste’s unique cultural attributes are integrated with modern governance, human rights and robust social welfare.¹³

In conclusion, intergenerational trauma is a significant yet understudied factor influencing community conflict, youth behaviour, political life and institutional development in Timor-Leste. FM observes that the politics of trauma may inadvertently limit the development of formal institutions by reinforcing reliance on informal, emotionally driven modes of interaction, particularly between politicians and broader society. Understanding and addressing this legacy is therefore essential not only for peacebuilding but also for the long-term consolidation of rule of law and effective governance.

¹³ See “Timor-Leste’s ASEAN Accession: Implications for Regional Geopolitics and National Identity” (2025), available here: <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2025/10/21/timor-lestes-asean-accession-implications-for-regional-geopolitics-and-national-identity/>

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

This research finds that contemporary community conflict dynamics in Timor-Leste are shaped by a combination of structural socio-economic vulnerabilities, historical legacies and deeply embedded socio-cultural patterns. While communities remain largely peaceful, persistent tensions continue to affect daily life, influence social relations and shape public trust in institutions.

Structural socio-economic pressures remain the primary drivers of conflict. Limited education, high unemployment, technological challenges, dependence on land and widespread domestic or interpersonal violence create environments where disputes intensify quickly. These pressures disproportionately affect youth, who often feel excluded from economic and political life and who may become involved in MAG activities or quasi-organised theft networks.

Digital misinformation has emerged as a powerful conflict trigger, capable of producing panic, mobilisation and disorder within hours. Communities lack the tools to verify information, and both traditional and formal institutions struggle to respond quickly enough. The case studies on community panic demonstrated that a single viral video or manipulated photograph can overwhelm communities, even where traditional authority is strong.

Land disputes remain persistent and unresolved, particularly where claims derive from displacement during the Indonesian occupation. Traditional leaders reduce tensions but cannot resolve disputes rooted in legal ambiguity or historical injustice. Municipal authorities lack the ability to enforce decisions, and the national government has not yet systematically addressed complex land ownership problems inherited from previous administrative eras (Portuguese and Indonesian).

Youth-related crime reflects both structural pressures and family-based behavioural influences. Quasi-organised theft rings involving young people, as documented in Viqueque, show how economic stress and social peer dynamics combine with weakened parental authority and community oversight to produce persistent petty crime, resulting in significant community disharmony.

This research also finds that intergenerational trauma is a significant yet understudied factor shaping both community conflict and Timor-Leste's political culture. Past experiences of violence continue to influence behaviour and social norms. Many adults use harsh disciplinary practices or demonstrate aggression towards family and

community members. Youth who did not experience war directly often inherit behavioural patterns and emotional vulnerabilities from their elders.

Past trauma also shapes Timor-Leste's political leadership style and governance. Many leaders often vividly recount resistance-era suffering in emotional and public ways. While these narratives are part of national identity, they may unintentionally re-traumatize communities or reinforce a political culture based on emotion, personal loyalty and historical grievance rather than on formal positions and rule-based institutions. The intersection of trauma, oral culture and informality may limit progress toward transparent, efficient and accountable governance.

Taken together, these findings highlight that community conflict in post-independence Timor-Leste is a complex expression of socio-economic stress, historical memory, inherited trauma, politicization and weak formal mechanisms. These are layered on to indigenous socio-cultural features such as strong kinship networks and oral culture, and further shaped by complex influences derived from multiple external sources, including Portuguese colonialism, the Catholic Church, Indonesian occupation, UN transitional administration, foreign aid programs, global media and international trade.

In order to successfully navigate these challenges and consolidate itself as a democratic, prosperous country with effective state institutions, FM believes that Timor-Leste must assert its own distinct political identity which incorporates the aspects of Timorese traditions most conducive to individual and societal wellbeing, such as social solidarity and deep family ties, while embracing modern values such as transparent, accountable and efficient governance, universal human rights and meritocracy. To achieve this, young Timorese intellectuals must engage in rigorous public debates on the future of Timor-Leste's political, social and economic development, challenging entrenched perspectives and offering alternatives grounded in local wisdom, rational analysis and scientific evidence.

Recommendations

Digital literacy, misinformation and critical thinking

- Launch local media literacy campaigns in schools, youth centres and community spaces, teaching people how to identify misinformation, edited videos and overly conspiratorial content.
- Produce infographics, Tetun-language videos and simple fact-checking tools understandable at *aldeia* and *suku* level.
- Partner with youth influencers, digital creators and student organisations to promote positive messaging and rapidly debunk viral hoaxes.
- Support youth-led early warning and information verification networks.

- Ensure PNTL and ministries have accessible media channels (e.g. official Facebook pages which are professionally managed) to issue clarifications quickly.

Strengthen mediation capacity and clarify long-term land disputes

- Expand training on mediation and legal frameworks for local mediators familiar with local customs and histories.
- Ensure agreements reached through customary mechanisms can be formally documented and recognised.
- Prioritise clarification of Indonesian-era administrative boundaries and land disputes linked to past displacement.

Expand youth development and violence-prevention programming

- Support sports, arts, agriculture, digital training and creative initiatives that connect youth with elders and provide alternatives to MAG involvement or theft networks.
- Promote youth civic engagement to reduce alienation and improve community cohesion.

Strengthen community–police collaboration and justice provision

- Enhance partnerships between PNTL, elders and community police to improve trust and respond collectively to emerging problems.
- Encourage collaborative restorative justice pathways for young offenders where appropriate.
- Increase the availability of legal aid to help youth and families navigate the system and reduce reliance on retaliation or informal punitive measures.

Integrate trauma-awareness into peacebuilding initiatives

- Train community mediators, civil society actors and youth workers to recognise trauma-related behaviours such as hyper-reactivity, explosive anger or fear responses.
- Include basic psychosocial support elements in community dialogues, reconciliation activities and youth programs.

Expand psychosocial services and community-based support

- Advocate for a national strategy to increase mental health services, outreach and training of local paraprofessionals.
- Support partnerships between NGOs, health staff and *lia-na'in* to identify vulnerable individuals and provide referrals.

- Promote parenting programs that teach non-violent discipline, emotional regulation and communication, breaking cycles of harsh parenting and inherited aggression.

Develop a future-oriented and youth-focused political culture and identity

- Balance commemoration of past heroism and sacrifices with future-oriented political events and debates.
- Pressure political leaders to adopt positive communication styles and organise events that promote orientation towards the future and youth inclusion.

Support transition toward formal, rules-based governance

- Promote reforms that strengthen rule of law, impartial administration and procedural decision making, reducing over-reliance on informal authority or emotional leadership.
- Encourage models of governance – consistent with FM’s concept of “social democracy with Timorese characteristics” – that integrate indigenous cultural strengths with modern standards and practices.

Promote research on trauma, community conflict and political culture

- Academics, civil society, donors and government should support initiatives to study the links between intergenerational trauma, youth behaviour, community violence, political culture and institutional development.
- Document community experiences of trauma-related conflict triggers to inform national policy.

Develop national strategies on youth, security and social development

- Develop a comprehensive, updated National Youth Policy which incorporates the views of youth leaders and organisations and outlines a realistic strategy for ensuring that government programs equip Timorese youth with the skills necessary for effective participation in the national development process.

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